

# Beef Cow Herds Shift As New Technology Brings More Changes

COLUMBIA, MO.

The Missouri cattle herd has changed, and bigger changes are ahead, says Scott Brown, University of Missouri livestock economist.

There's a cow population shift from north to south in Missouri, Brown says. The reason: Corn and soybean crops return more per acre than cows.

Pastureland that once held cows now grows crops. While cow numbers have dropped more than 50 percent in some northern counties, counties in the Ozarks have gained cows.

Brown gave an optimistic outlook to those at the 2013 Breimyer Seminar, July 17 on the MU campus. Theme for the day was "The Future of the Missouri Cattle Industry."

Economists and industry leaders shared their ideas on the agricultural policies in beef production. Policy seminars were started in 1973 by MU professor Harold Breimyer. They continue in his name.

The biggest beef industry change has been cattle prices never seen before. That's tempered by lack of record-setting profits. Higher commodity prices have raised cattle prices, Brown said.

However, the USDA predicts a record-setting corn crop, which Brown says would lead to a sharp drop in corn prices.

With lower corn prices, producers will increase production, feed more cattle, and prices will fall. "The laws of supply and demand do work," Brown says.

Brown's optimism for the future of the cattle industry rides on new technology now available to cow herd owners. "The closer I've worked with the MU animal scientists, the more potential I see."

Brown listed changes coming. Increased use of fixed-time artificial insemination (FTAI), use of genomics to guide breeding, sexed semen to raise all steers or all heifers, and new forages.

All can lead to higher-quality beef. The future of a profitable beef industry depends of producing quality beef that pleases consumers, he says.

Even in the recent recession consumers continued to pay more for beef.

Missouri cattle producers should evaluate the new technology, Brown says. "Make sure it fits your operation."

Brown cautions that change can be difficult – and easy to ignore, but Missouri producers can't afford to ignore growing acceptance of USDA prime grade beef, domestically and in exports.

He pointed to the beef breeding research at the MU Thompson Farm near Trenton in northern Missouri.

That research focuses on better genetics, using high-accuracy AI sires and refining FTAI protocols. Brown analyzes the MU farm's profitability in producing prime beef that draws premiums at the packing plant. The MU steers have been fed at Irsik and Doll feed yard in Kansas.

Brown also seeks to develop indexes to compare those gains. Over the years, as the herd improved, returns have grown. Brown has seen prime steers bring nearly 1.10 on his index, while select-grade steers bring 0.97.

Successful producers must aim to be better than average.

Even in the MU cow herd, which looks uniform, there remains great variability in return from each cow. To the economist, that shows a need for better records to guide breeding and culling decisions.

With current cow numbers and the research base in Missouri, the state remains positioned to grow in importance in the U.S. cow-calf sector.

However, he cautioned that competitors are working hard to improve herds as well. "We can't keep doing things the same way we have in the past," Brown says.

Missouri has resources to produce the highest-quality beef that returns the most money. While beef cow numbers continue to decline, production per cow continues to rise.

"A major shift in focus must be on targeting consumer demand. And increase productivity even faster," Brown told the 140 attending the seminar.

Going back to his land maps showing where cow herds reside, he pointed to Ozark land that now grows more corn and soybeans than it did 40 years ago.

"We have to improve our use of forages on those hills to boost returns to the cows. That's how to keep land for cows.

"Recently, the commodities have been winning. We have the tools to do better with beef," Brown concluded. Δ